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SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND THE PROTESTANT COMMUNITY IN CENTRAL VIETNAM

REF: A) HCMC 968 and previous B) HCMC 623 C) HCMC 910

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Discussions in early October with the GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV), house church leaders and provincial government officials indicate that steady progress continues to be made of religious freedom issues affecting Protestants in central coastal Vietnam. SECV leaders in Danang and Quang Nam told us that provincial governments continue to facilitate their operations under Vietnam's legal framework on religion. The SECV also reported that Quang Ngai province resolved to its satisfaction an August church burning incident. Similarly, representatives of the United World Mission Church of Vietnam, a house church organization operating throughout Central Vietnam -- including the Central Highlands -- told us that their 123 congregations now operate without significant restriction. The house church leaders report that the central Committee for Religious Affairs is considering their application for registration under the legal framework; a decision should be forthcoming by mid-December. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On the margins of the visit of the October 5-7 visit of the Consul General to Danang and Quang Nam provinces (septels), PolOff met with key local officials and church leaders to assess religious freedom issues facing Protestants in central coastal Vietnam. Pastor Nguyen Toi, General Secretary the Executive Board of the United World Mission Church of Vietnam (UWMCV), an unrecognized Protestant house church organization said that conditions for his church have improved. Founded in 1956, the UWMCV's focuses on outreach to ethnic minority communities in Central Vietnam; over 80 percent of the church's 26,000 followers (123 congregations) are ethnic minority. Although headquartered in Danang, the church has only six churches and 600 adherents there, all of whom are ethnic Vietnamese. The UWMCV's largest concentration of churches is in the Central Highlands province of Kontum, where it claims 13,000 adherents in 44 congregations, all from the Gie Trieng ethnic group. The church says it has 2,214 adherents in Gia Lai province in 23 congregations -- mainly ethnic Jarai -- and another 700 in six congregations in Dak Lak province, all ethnic Bru. Other congregations are scattered throughout central Vietnam, down to HCMC. Because of post-1975 GVN restrictions, the UWMCV only has six ordained pastors, all ordained before 1975. Toi said that the UWMCV has another six, self-ordained pastors, and 212 voluntary preachers.

¶3. (SBU) Toi said that he has been de facto General Secretary of the church since 1974 as the GVN has prevented the UWMCV from holding a general conference to elect new leadership. Toi explained that the GVN claimed that the organization has no legal status in Vietnam, and, therefore had no right to organize. Prior to 2005, the UWMCV had reached out a number of times to the GVN to attempt to legalize its status, but to no avail. The church's three hospitals and clinics in the Central Highlands and a substantial portion of its compound in Danang were expropriated after 1975.

¶4. (SBU) At present, all of the church's congregations have been able to operate without significant official harassment, even in Dak Lak province, where the local government has sharply curbed many Protestant organizations, including the GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ref A). Toi explained that the UWMCV has stayed clear of "Dega Protestantism" or other activities that officials believe foster ethnic minority separatism.

¶5. (SBU) Toi said that the UWMCV enjoys a cordial working relationship with the Ministry of Public Security, whose officials periodically meet with him and his colleagues. He complained that the same could not be said for officials from the Danang Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), although the CRA is supposed to be his primary intermediary. Danang CRA officials reportedly refused to meet officially with the UWMCV, claiming the church has no legal status

¶6. (SBU) Despite the lack of official contact with the CRA, in April 2005 the UWMCV had submitted an application to Hanoi for registration to legalize operations under Vietnam's legal framework on religion. A representative of the central-level CRA subsequently called to confirm receipt and to assure Toi that the application would be approved "soon." (According to the legal framework, as an organization that operates in many provinces, the UWMCV must apply for registration with the central level CRA.) Although law mandates a decision within 60 days of application, Toi has not received a reply. However, hours before our visit,

Toi said he was contacted by Danang officials who requested Toi to submit one more form, the "annual registry of church activities," and promised that the church would be legalized "very, very soon."

The SECV in Central Vietnam

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¶ 17. (SBU) Ma Phuc Hiep, a senior Pastor of the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) in Danang, told us October 7 that conditions for the SECV continued to improve in Danang and Thua Thien Hue provinces since our last meeting with him in June (ref B). Cooperation with local officials, including the CRA, is positive and ongoing. For example, the Danang CRA recently allowed the SECV to hold a large religious retreat that drew participants from neighboring provinces.

¶ 18. (SBU) Separately, in a meeting October 5, Pastors Ma Phuc Tin and Doan Xuan Phat of the Executive Board of the Quang Nam SECV also confirmed that conditions had improved markedly for its 15,715 members since the new legal framework on religion had been promulgated. Although the SECV in Quang Nam is overwhelmingly -- 95 percent -- majority Kinh Vietnamese, its 400 ethnic minority Ko Tu worshipers now can gather freely at a single meeting point. The Quang Nam CRA also facilitated the appointment of seven pastor-designates to a training course in Danang. The SECV still encounters periodic problems at the village level, where local officials are poorly informed and turnover high. However, problems get fixed at the district and provincial levels, because "when Quang Nam gets a law, provincial officials implement it," Tin told us.

¶ 19. (SBU) Pastor Tin also said that he has oversight responsibility for the SECV's 5,000 adherents in neighboring Quang Ngai province. He had traveled there in September with the HCMC-based National General Secretary Le Van Thien to investigate August incidents involving allegations of church burning and forced renunciation involving an SECV church serving ethnic minority Hre adherents (Ref C). Tin said that, following meetings at the provincial level, local officials were ordered to rebuild the home of the SECV voluntary preacher that also served as the house church for the SECV congregation. Tin was unsure as to whether local officials were formally reprimanded, but said he was satisfied with the province's response to the problem. He said that the incident stemmed from tension within the Hre community between the converted who sought to evangelize those who maintained their traditional beliefs.

¶ 10. (SBU) In a separate meeting October 7, Dao Duy Pho, Chairman of the Quang Nam CRA, told us that his province is committed to implementing positively the new legal framework on religion. The province is ready to approve new churches and congregations to add to the 22 the SECV already operates in the province, Pho said. The province also is considering how to compensate the SECV for the single property that the GVN expropriated prior to 1975. Quang Nam also is applying the Prime Minister's February 2005 "Instruction on Protestantism," which directs government officials to facilitate and normalize the operations of house churches. In this context, the province has allowed two house churches affiliated with Pastor Toi's UWMCV to operate unimpeded. The Quang Nam CRA also will welcome UWMCV efforts to register under the new legal framework, whenever "Toi and his colleagues are ready to contact us."

¶ 11. (SBU) Comment: The SECV's ability to work directly with provincial governments throughout the region to resolve problems to its satisfaction -- including in Quang Ngai -- is a new and welcome development. Although the reluctance of local Danang and Quang Nam CRA officials to reach out to or meet officially with house church leaders is disappointing, it is not atypical of the officiousness of CRA bureaucrats throughout southern Vietnam. More importantly, Pastor Toi's church has been able to operate successfully throughout Vietnam's Central Highlands and Central Coast, apparently even in retrograde Dak Lak. Equally important, local and central-level officials are considering the UWMCV's application to normalize its activities under Vietnam's legal framework on religion. Toi told us that he would respond immediately to the Danang CRA's October 7 request for additional information on his church related to his petition. Accordingly, the Central-level CRA should reply to Toi with a written decision no later than mid-December. End Comment.

WINNICK